

*Research Strategies*. 1992. vol. 10, p. 111 - 114.

ISSN: 0734-3310

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## **The Gateway: User Education in a Changing Environment**

*by Fred Roecker*



Fred Roecker is User Education Librarian, Ohio State University, Columbus, OH.

Tom Eadie's piece raises important questions that those of us in the Office of Library User Education at Ohio State University have been concerned about for quite some time. We agree with him that user education departments have to assess their existing programs and determine if they meet students' information needs. But our conclusions differ. While Eadie concluded that the reference department is the most effective instruction vehicle, especially given the changing information landscape, we have concluded that it is user education that can best help students learn how to use the changing library.

### **USER EDUCATION AT OSU**

For 15 years, OSU's Office of Library User Education has provided library instruction, including workshops, course - related instruction in the classroom, library assignments for all incoming freshmen, and graduate research sessions. Currently, over 35,000 students per year receive some library skills education.

The mission of the Office is to make people successful, independent users of library resources. We've defined "information - literate users" as students who can organize a research strategy and then identify, locate, access, and evaluate relevant items found at our library or any other. The Office, therefore, creates workshops, presentations, handouts, and other programs to help students understand how knowledge is organized, how to find information, and how to use it.

## NEED FOR CHANGE

In the mid - 80s, Virginia Tiefel, Director of Library User Education, evaluated our various library programs to see if they were meeting these information literacy goals. Many of her conclusions resemble the points made by Eadie. Several are summarized here.

- Workshops. Insufficient time allotted and information conveyed to make students successful, confident library users. Retention and application by students often was poor as reference librarians were still inundated with questions, including those directly addressed by workshops only days or even hours before.
- Library tours. Present too much information, are highly staff intensive, and can be disruptive to library researchers.
- Handouts. Very labor intensive, and thus costly, to produce.

Tiefel also recognized that the university community and library environments were changing in a manner that the Office would soon have to address. New electronic resources were continually being added to OSU's libraries, requiring instruction on access and content. Library users were also changing: non - traditional users such as continuing education students with no time to attend special workshops began to require more library services, often when reference desks were closed.

Our traditional library instructional workshops, flyers, and tours had already been questioned for their effectiveness and adaptability. Most probably could not be customized to help users in new situations; and even if we decided to try modifying these existing programs, a tremendous effort over the coming years would be required. Because of reduced budgets, we could not anticipate the increase in staff necessary to provide more workshops, rework all information handouts, and conduct tours for all who desire them.

Thus, Tiefel looked at the reference department as a possible resource for educating and providing expanded library service. Unfortunately, however, our Information Services staff was already working at full capacity and reference desk hours were being cut due to university - wide budget problems. Adding new reference staff to assist with user training on existing or new electronic resources was unlikely. Clearly, giving reference services any added responsibility, while desirable, was simply not possible without additional financial or personnel resources — resources that were simply not available at OSU.

From this assessment, Tiefel surmised that only User Education had the overview of information needs at Ohio State necessary to create a program capable of meeting user needs in all disciplines. While the Information Services Department should respond to specific research needs from the desk in a specific library, User Education should teach users the skills necessary to understand and access materials in all libraries, independent of reference librarians. A relationship between these departments was feasible, but placing full responsibility for user needs on the Information Services Department was not.

## THE GATEWAY TO INFORMATION

Eadie noted that ideal user education should be "as simple as possible for the majority of students [with] personal services provided to those who need more" — a sentiment shared by Tiefel. Thus, we set out to develop The Gateway to Information, a computer access system to assist a majority of library novices (undergraduate students) to identify, locate, access, and evaluate relevant resources. Requirements for the system were that it be effective without relying on traditional user education programs such as library workshops, handouts, tours, or staff assistance; that it not require more responsibilities of the overloaded reference department; that it be developed and implemented with grant funds; that it be available even after the reference desk was closed; and that it simplify access to electronic resources and provide simple assimilation of new resources, regardless of format (i.e., paper, microform, electronic, etc.). We wanted The Gateway to address many of the labor-intensive responsibilities of User Education and Information Services along with features such as the following:

- *Search strategy outline.* A menu screen to remind users of the variety of resources beyond the card catalog and periodical articles. Result: users are exposed to a variety of materials without requiring reference assistance.
- *Consistent answers.* A database of relevant materials recommended (and periodically updated) by the Information Services Department and other department libraries' reference staff. Result: users receive guidance to the most relevant basic materials in all fields.
- *User-friendly front end.* A set of common displays and commands for information access no matter which CD-ROM or catalog database is searched. Result: users can access any electronic resource successfully the first time without handouts, manuals, workshops, or staff assistance.
- *Direct access or pathways to resources.* Programming that allows novice users to be led to relevant materials about which they know little or nothing while providing shortcuts for advanced researchers who want to quickly locate and search materials with which they are familiar. Result: users are given access assistance customized to their level of experience.
- *Library information.* A system function that answers basic orientation questions and makes available library floorplans, campus maps, collection profiles, current hours, and library procedures. Result: users no longer need library tours, general orientation workshops, printed handouts, or reference librarians for many of their basic questions.

The Gateway was designed to be flexible, to expand in its capacity to fill new user needs such as advanced searching for graduate students and faculty members, remote access for users from offices or dorms, and availability when the library is closed. Special sections on The

Gateway could present discipline - specific pathways and materials usually only covered by librarians in course - related workshops.

## **EFFECTS OF THE GATEWAY**

The Gateway allows library patrons to be independent information users. They can successfully identify, locate, access, and evaluate hundreds of core research materials without reliance upon workshops, brochures, and a reference librarian. Of the 1,800-plus users who completed evaluations on The Gateway, 81 percent considered their searches completely or mostly successful, 88 percent felt it was easy to use, and 94 percent said they would use the system again.

This fall, coincident with a cutback in reference desk and library hours throughout the campus, 50 new Gateway workstations were installed in all OSU libraries. Professors are beginning to incorporate The Gateway into their classes, remote library patrons are testing a new version available from any computer, and users of all library and computer skill levels are avidly using the library version regularly. User Education workshops have been cut by two-thirds, and printed materials have been curtailed as that information is now available on The Gateway. Tours are down to one per quarter for incoming international students only.

## **SUMMARY**

The questions Tom Eadie has raised are valid, but his suggestion to abandon user education in lieu of handling user needs at the reference desk is not. Reference services would only be compromised by this approach, and libraries would lose the strength of an already - established department whose mission is to serve users who may not be standing at the reference desk. While personal delivery of information is desirable, it is not the reality today and is less likely to be so in the future.

Dedicated librarians such as Virginia Tiefel and Tom Eadie who question library user services from the perspective of both the user and library professional enable us to make progress. While their conclusions may differ, their contribution to the on - going debate is significant. I believe user education is essential, not because it is my department but because our mission is unique to the university and library users benefit from our work. The Gateway to Information is a tool that works well today and can play a significant role in the future. This system would not exist without OSU's Office of Library User Education.

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